

La Grande Illusion



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DIRECTED BY: Jean Renoir

CERTIFICATE: PG

RUNNING TIME: 102 mins

COUNTRY: France

LANGUAGE: French, English, German and Russian

RELEASE DATE: 8th June 1937

KEYWORDS: history, politics, World War I, France, anti-Semitism

SUITABLE FOR: 15–19, French, media/film studies, history, general studies

SYNOPSIS

During the First World War, two French soldiers are captured and imprisoned in a German POW camp. Several escape attempts follow until they are sent to a seemingly impenetrable fortress from which escape seems impossible.

BEFORE VIEWING

CRITICISM AND REVIEWS

One of the most striking things about *La Grande Illusion* is its complex reception history. In 1937, when it was first released, it seemed to please everybody from the nationalist right to the communist left. It was also much admired abroad. Goebbels, Hitler's Chief of Propaganda, was reportedly impressed enough to label Renoir 'cinematic enemy number one'. Roosevelt, the American president reportedly said it was a film every believer in democracy should see. Later, when it was re-released in France in 1946, the reception was far less unanimously positive. Writing in one of the newspapers spawned by the French Resistance, critic Georges Altman famously said how painful he now found it to watch a film he had once admired. He could no longer accept the image of the Germans he found in the film, the way in which Franco-German relations were shown, nor indeed the image of the Jewish character. By 1958, when the film was re-released again and Europe was entering into a period of durable peace and prosperity, reactions had again shifted. Although there were a few dissenting voices, the film was generally seen as a humanist masterpiece.

Discuss:

- How can we explain these shifting reactions? More generally, what do they tell us about the meaning of a film?
- Is the meaning in the film itself and therefore something unchanging? Or, can it shift and, if so, why?

CENSORSHIP

The censor was uneasy about *La Grande Illusion*'s re-release in 1946. The film was only distributed when the following three scenes had been cut:

- The moment when Rosenthal opens a food parcel, comments that the Germans are half-starved and gives a present of some chocolate to one of the German prison guards.
- The scene showing the triumphant Germans after the capture of the famous French fort at Douaumont.
- The moment when Maréchal takes Elsa, the German woman, in his arms. How can we explain why a French censor would have felt the need to cut these three moments of the film a year after the Second World War had ended?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story the film told took place in the First World War, a conflict characterised by the almost unimaginable slaughter produced when technologies of mass killing (machine guns, artillery, poison gas) were pitted against millions of conscript soldiers. Because the war tested each country's productive capacity to the limit, it involved the mobilisation not simply of the soldiers but also of the entire civilian population whose efforts were vital to keep the factories and the farms turning over. The propaganda effort, the need to keep the population's support for the war intact, was thus also crucial.

Such was the slaughter, however, that the dominant sentiment in post-war France was pacifism. During the 1920s and into the early 1930s, Franco-German reconciliation seemed a real possibility. However, in the 1930s, things began to change. Hitler and his Nazi party took power in Germany and set the country on the road to rearmament and nationalist aggression. French pacifism remained a dominant force but seemed increasingly untenable as the decade progressed.

The mid-1930s also saw the rise of a fascist threat within France itself. Following a massive right-wing demonstration in Paris on 6th February 1934, when it seemed as if democracy might be under threat, the left and moderate centre came together to form the Popular Front, an anti-fascist political alliance. It was around this time that Jean Renoir, *La Grande Illusion's* director, would start to become politically involved and to make films clearly committed to the left and to the anti-fascist cause.

We might ask to what extent this complex context explains some of the film's ambiguity. Firstly, it had to be a convincing representation of the First World War and the climate of competing nationalisms that the period generated. Secondly, it was marked by the pacifism that was such a feature of 1920s and 1930s France. Thirdly, it may also have expressed some of the politics of the Popular Front of which Renoir was such a committed supporter.

See what evidence you can find for each of the following ways of seeing the film:

- It is a work that faithfully reflects the nationalist enthusiasm of the wartime years.
- It is a work whose main, pacifist message is that France and Germany have no reason to fight each other.
- It is a work that wants to warn us against the fascist threat but cannot do so explicitly because fascism was not in existence during the First World War (think particularly about how the film deals with anti-Semitism, but think also about how the second prisoner-of-war camp may look forward to a world that has ceased to be free).

Could we perhaps make the case that the film is all three of these things at the same time?

If so, does this mean that the film is simply confused? Or does it find convincing ways to work through its own complexity?

If we agree that the circumstances in which the film was made inevitably made it ambiguous, does this ambiguity help explain some of the different ways people have interpreted the film?

AFTER VIEWING

POLITICS AND COUPLES

Different people see the politics of the film in different ways. If we take Renoir's commitment to the political left as a guide, we would expect the film to promote values such as equality. However, some people have argued that what comes through above all is nostalgia for the pre-war world.

As a way of teasing out the film's politics, we might look at what it does with three 'couples':

- de Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein, the aristocratic French and German cavalry officers
- Maréchal, the French working-class man, and Rosenthal, the wealthy French Jew
- Maréchal and Elsa, the German peasant woman

It has been suggested that, almost despite itself, the film gives the most admirable roles and the most moving relationship to the two aristocrats. Renoir himself had been a cavalry officer before the war and had thus been part of a branch of the army with strong aristocratic traditions. Might we pull these two points together to make the case that the film is therefore nostalgic for lost traditions and values?

Alternatively, could we use the other two couples to make a very different case and to say that the film is anti-racist, internationalist and egalitarian?



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THEMES

One of the great things about Renoir and one of the reasons people love him so much as a filmmaker is the generosity of his vision. When we say someone is a political filmmaker, we tend to assume that there is a coldness or a distance in their work. This is definitely not the case with Renoir. His films have a real warmth about them. Political ideas, where they do come in, are expressed through everyday life and popular culture rather than in any cold, abstract way. In *La Grande Illusion*, this perhaps comes through most strongly in the use of food, religion and popular song. Think about how Renoir uses each of these elements to put warm flesh on the political bones.

- Food: think about how food and meals are used to explore both what unites and what divides people along lines of nationality and social class. Look especially at the meal the group share in the first prison camp. Does food pull the French together as a nation or does it push them apart along class lines?
- Religion: look out for religious motifs and themes in the film. In particular, look out for crucifixes and think about what they might symbolise and about how they might connect to the film's narrative and particularly de Boeldieu's actions. Look also at the use the film makes of Christmas towards the end. What message is Christmas intended to convey to the viewer?
- Music: look at how the film uses popular song and national anthems. If anthems clearly divide people, is popular song contrastingly seen as something that can pull different nations and classes together? Or can it also get sucked into national rivalries? If the latter is true, what broader point is the film making about culture's role in war?

FILM STYLE

One of the things that mark out Renoir's 1930s cinema is its very characteristic style. This style is built on three or four closely inter-related features:

1. Long takes used in preference to a more edited style. The French cinema of the 1930s had longer average shot lengths than the Hollywood cinema of the same period. However, even within French cinema, Renoir's films tended to have longer takes than average.
2. Composition in depth of the image. Many films use shallow focus allied with screen composition to draw our attention to just one plane of action, typically where the stars will be found. Renoir's films are famous for their deep staging and for the way we are often asked to think about the relationship between several planes of action rather than simply being told where to look.
3. Frequently virtuoso camera mobility. In most films, the action seems to have been set up for the camera. In Renoir's films, it typically feels the other way around: the camera moves to follow the action, often shifting from one point of interest to another in the same shot. Lateral camera mobility means that we are constantly aware of off-screen space. We see one space but we know that the camera may move to bring another space into play.
4. A preference to show individuals in social and spatial contexts rather than in ways that isolate them from what surrounds them.

Think about:

- How these different stylistic choices are dependent on each other.
- How other choices, such as the use of off-screen sound, may relate to them.
- How stylistic choices might connect to the politics of the film.
- How the stylistic choices would support the description of Renoir as a realist and as someone who respected the integrity of the filmed world.

Use the table below to jot down examples of some of these key stylistic features, noting where they occur in the film. Try and find at least two examples of each feature:

Feature	Where in film (scene or sequence / time)	Effect of this choice
Extreme long takes of a minute or more		
Composition on multiple planes		
Examples of virtuoso camera mobility		
Shots that begin with an individual or an object but then track backwards or sideways to connect the individual or the object to a broader context		

Are there moments in the film where the editing, the use of camera or the handling of dialogue seems more classical and more conventional? See if you can note down two or three of these and explain why you think they occur where they do.

Where in film (scene or sequence / time)?	In what way is the style more conventional?	Reason for this choice



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CLOSE VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1. Look in detail at the opening of the film up to the moment when Maréchal and his squadron leader move out of the flyer's mess into the little office. How many shots are used in the opening? Is this what you would have expected? Hollywood films typically cut on entrances and exits or on looks by characters and deal with dialogue through shot – reverse shot composition. How many 'missed opportunities' for cuts can you identify? What is the effect of the absence of cuts? Is it purely a stylistic variation or does it mean that we look differently at what we see? To what extent is camera movement an alternative to cutting? What sort of movements does the camera perform in the shot (panning, tracking, tilts)?

The first shot begins with a close-up of a gramophone and of the hero before the camera begins to move and changes the nature of the shot. Conventional close-ups tend to separate characters and their emotions from what surrounds them. How and why is Renoir's use of the close-up different?

2. Look closely at the second sequence of the film when the two Frenchmen arrive in the German flyers' mess. You may notice that the set designer, Eugene Lourié, actually used the same hut as he had in the opening sequence in the French flyers' mess. The fact that it is the same building cues us to look for similarities and differences between the two messes.

Paying attention to both details of *mise en scène* (the layout of the spaces and the staging of interactions) and of camerawork, compare the way the two messes are seen. Does the film seem to want to underline what the French and the Germans have in common or to stress their differences? How might we connect whatever conclusions we draw from our comparisons with our sense of the film's underlying message?

3. Look at the famous scene where the two aristocrats talk together in von Rauffenstein's chapel quarters in the second prison camp. How is this scene edited? Is it different to the general pattern of the film? If so, why do you think this might be? Is the film trying to highlight the similarities between the two men (the way they mirror each other), or is it bringing out their differences?

Listen carefully to what the two men are saying to each other. Are they agreeing? How might their dialogue affect our understanding of the film's politics? Does it help support the case for the film being nostalgic about the old order? Or does it back up the argument that the film is committed above all to equality and to international openness?

MISE EN SCÈNE: COSTUME AND DÉCOR

We've already looked at some of the elements of the mise en scène of the film in relation to its staging of interactions. It is also worth considering how mise en scène is used to establish character and a sense of place.

- Look at the way the different characters dress. How, for example, does the film use costume and the way it is worn to underscore differences of social class? How does posture work to reinforce what we learn from costume?
- Look at what props are associated with each character (pictures, books, other objects) and think about how the props help individualise each character but also tell us about their class identity.
- Look carefully at the different spaces and the contrasts between them. How are the two prison camps different? What does this contrast tell us about the changing mood of the film? What does von Rauffenstein's chapel room and how it is furnished tell us about his character? What does Elsa's farmhouse tell us about her, the way she lives, and the effect that the war has had on her life?



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FILM AND WAR

The First World War began appearing on film during the conflict itself as the famous British film, *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) amply testifies. The films about the war that have gone down in history have, however, all tended to be anti-war films: Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (1919) and its sound remake (1937); King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925); Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930); G. W. Pabst's *Westfront 1918* (1930); Raymond Bernard's *The Wooden Crosses* (1932); Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957).

To some extent all these anti-war films worked by contrasting the fragility of the soldiers with the monstrous conditions of the battlefield and the destructive power of the weaponry. The films' familiar iconography revolved around the trenches, the barbed wire, the twisted landscape, the vulnerable bodies and faces of the soldiers, the characteristic weaponry (rifles, machine guns, artillery) and the spectacular shell-bursts and explosions. By the time sound cinema arrived (in Pabst's and Milestone's films), the iconography was already well established. What sound added was a new contrast, that between the fragility of the human voice and the noises of mechanised warfare, to the existing mix.

La Grande Illusion is usually seen as the very greatest of these great anti-war films. Paradoxically, however, it seems to show us almost nothing of the war. We do not see the trenches. The usual iconography and the habitual soundscape are almost entirely absent. Moreover, whereas in the other great anti-war films of the 1930s, most if not all of the main cast are typically killed, here all but one end the film unscathed and the one who dies does so in circumstances that have nothing to do with the horror of the trenches. This paradoxical set of circumstances raises a series of questions about the film's relationship to the war film genre and its depiction of the conflict.

- Is it a war film at all? What elements of the war film do we find in it?
- Is it better seen as part of a sub-genre, the prisoner-of-war film?
- Why is it seen as the greatest film about the First World War if it seems not to show the war?
- Is it in fact more effective precisely because it avoids the usual iconography and sounds and forces us to focus instead on what unites and divides people and nations?
- Is it able to ask us to think about our own stake in nationalism and how we can be seduced by it? If so, how is this seduction brought in?
- What is the consequence of the film keeping most of its cast alive? Is this an avoidance of the horror of war or does it allow the film to somehow think past the war? If so, how?

FURTHER LINKS

Further contextual background:

www.port.ac.uk/special/france1815to2003/chapter7/interviews/filetodownload,35015,en.pdf

Article from the American Historical Association website, taken from the March 2008 issue of the Masters at the Movies series of *Perspectives on History*:

www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0803/0803fil2.cfm

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